



Museum Musings

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The Boys' Brigade, and Its Battle Against the Big Boy Problem



Flag of the 7th Toronto Company of The Boys' Brigade

Said a thoughtful elder of an historic Presbyterian Church, "We have lost a generation of men from our church".

"How do you account for it?" queried another.

"Years ago we let the boys, that are now men, slip out of our Sunday-school." (McKinney, pg. 15)

A similar sentiment by a Presbyterian layman in Glasgow, Scotland in the early 1880s was the motivation for what became a significant organization that had great impact on young men in Great Britain and its colonies and the Dominion of Canada. The scenario that was later dubbed the "big boy problem" in the late 19th century concerned young men's loss of interest in the church. This often led to a lack of participation, and ultimately, to a significant number of young men departing from the church.

Inspired by a desire to engage young men in Christian education and faith formation, this Presbyterian organization quickly gained an international and inter-denominational following. The organization, although apparently absent in Canada in the 21st century, helped to mould the spiritual integrity of many of Canada's Christian

men (and women, later in the 20th century) during their teenage years. **The Boys' Brigade has the reputation of being the world's oldest Protestant youth uniformed organization.**

In 1883, a Sabbath School teacher by the name of William Alexander Smith (later Sir William Smith) noticed an unsettling trend in his class of young men. Their attention was difficult to hold. But, he noticed that they were very attentive and disciplined whenever drill practice took place. He conceived a plan whereby the physical training offered by the Young Men's Christian Association (in which he had become a member in 1871) and the type of military discipline (as enforced by a regiment such as the 1st Lanarkshire Rifle Volunteers, which he had joined in 1873) coalesced into a new organization which would offer Christian training to young men aged 12 through 18. The organization would prepare young men for future leadership roles within their congregations. The intent was to develop a program which would provide young men two invaluable life assets or "pillars" – discipline and religion (meaning, faith in Jesus Christ).

Smith organized the first company of The Boys' Brigade in the Sunday School of North Woodside Mission Hall in (Kelvinbridge) Glasgow. This was a mission of the Free College Church of which Smith was a member. Along with brothers, James R. Hill and John B. Hill, fellow Sunday School teachers at the Mission, the first company held its organizational meeting on Oct. 4, 1883.

The company was the basic unit and it was required to be connected to a congregation, Sabbath School or Christian organization such as a temperance union. No companies existed independently. There were two ranks of adult officer: captain; and lieutenants. The minister was expected to serve as the company chaplain. A battalion could be formed in any town or district where there were six or more companies.

The constitution identified the object of the Boys' Brigade which "shall be the advancement of Christ's Kingdom among Boys; and the promotion of habits of Obedience, Reverence, Discipline, Self-respect, and all that tends towards a true Christian Manliness". (*The Boys' Brigade, On Starting a Company*, pg. 2)

Offering boys physical activities such as gymnastics, athletics, football (soccer) and cricket competitions, and programs such as first aid and band practice as well as crafts and games opened new ventures to boys who would have found these exciting novel opportunities nowhere else. To The Boys' Brigade also belongs **the distinction of being the first group to offer organized youth camping**. The popularity of camping can be traced back to William Smith's Brigade sailing camp at Auchenlochan, Tighnabruaich, in the Kyles of Bunte, Scotland in 1886.

The organization spread quickly with companies being formed throughout Scotland and Great Britain, then spreading into other countries. The first company in the United States was formed in St. Louis, Missouri in 1887; (Springhall, pg. 76) the second at Westminster Presbyterian Church in San Francisco in 1889. In Canada, the first company was formed in St. John's Presbyterian Church in St. John, New Brunswick in the latter year. The second company was formed not in a nearby community, but at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Sarnia, Ont. in 1890. Within 4 years, there were 915 boys enrolled in 27 companies throughout Canada.



Although the name of the Boys' Brigade is mostly unknown to younger generations of Canadians, an organization that grew out of the parent one is well-known. One of the former leaders and fellow officers left in order to design an organization distinct from the Boys' Brigade. He borrowed elements such as outdoors studies, fieldcraft exercises, survival training and orienteering and developed a program which placed a greater emphasis on them. This happened in 1907 when Lord Baden-Powell founded the **Boy Scouts**.

The badge design has remained unchanged since it was created by William Alexander Smith. (The red cross was the badge of the Boys' Life Brigade, which amalgamated with the B. B. in 1926.)

The crest and motto (and King James spelling of "stedfast") was inspired by Hebrews Chapter 6 verse 19: "Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast". (McFarlan, pg. 6)

Sources:

The Boys' Brigade, On Starting a Company. Glasgow: Abbey House, [Aug. 1938].

Source: The Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives. Board of Christian Education fonds. Boys' Brigade, File 1983-1015-3-8

McFarlan, Donald M. *First For Boys, The Story of the Boys' Brigade, 1883-1983.*

Boys' Brigade website. <http://www.boys-brigade.org.uk/ffb.pdf>. Accessed May 10, 2014.

An expanded edition of this article is in preparation.

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